

Effects of Task Variables on Learners' Oral and Written Development and Engagement in EFL Classrooms in Japan

Abstract

This dissertation investigates pedagogical tasks which are 'meaningful' to the learners in EFL classrooms. The principle of tasks-based language teaching (TBLT) has been developed in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) since the mid 1980s (Ellis, 2004; 2012; Samuda & Bygate, 2008) and revealed the benefits provided by tasks in which students use language for meaningful communication resulting in second language (L2) development. A 'task' is considered to be a perfect device for motivating learners to engage in language use which concurrently involves some cognitive activities (e.g., predicting, solving, enjoying, searching) similar to the daily activities we experience. In addition, a 'task' accords with the theory of SLA which explains that language learning takes place when the learner *intakes* the language in meaningful communication which captures their interest and permits them to convey their message (Mackey, 2012, Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Van den Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009).

However, despite the efficacy of the utilization of tasks for L2 development, their value in enabling 'meaningful' language use by the teacher and students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms is questionable. Various questions have been raised about issues such as how communicative language skills could be acquired in EFL classrooms in which

teaching tends to prioritize developing language forms rather than meaning for communication from the beginning stage of L2 learning, and what the pedagogical goals of the skills are. More specifically, there is a question about the ways in and extent to which a 'task' can be successfully utilized for Japanese teenage learners so that they may fully accommodate themselves to a 'meaningful' task. Above all, Japanese students at a low level of English proficiency have been left behind in task research. Consequently, whether or not the findings in ESL settings are applicable to Japanese L2 learners has been a great concern. Therefore, my study has investigated pedagogical tasks which will enable learners to successfully participate and has sought ways of facilitating the internalization of L2 learning in the classroom context in Japan.

In order to determine the validity of the approach and the ways to make it profitable for L2 classrooms, the study initially addresses the nature of a task, most commonly confused with an exercise or a drill, followed by its benefits in one's cognitive process of L2 learning from the point of view of SLA theories. There has been no consensus about the definition of a 'task' which varies across teaching and learning contexts and the type of learners. However, the key element of the task consists in learning by experience involving some cognitive activities. One of the most significant discussions, then, is about the extent to which learners can acquire accuracy of language while engaging in meaning-focused tasks. A number of studies have explored the ways of and techniques (e.g., corrective feedback, implicit input, priming) for integrating form-focused activities into meaning-focused activities. Nevertheless,

there has been little research focusing on what tasks lead teenage learners to successful task engagement and subsequent L2 development in actual classroom settings. Clearly, more research should be done on what happens to students by investigating their attentional resources while performing tasks in dynamic classroom interactions. Research into SLA which has shown the benefits of TBLT in terms of learners' cognitive processes of *input*, *intake*, *output* including *noticing the gap*, *attention*, *awareness* and *negotiation* in their language experiences will be examined in Chapter 2.

Moreover, it is quite challenging to investigate the benefits of tasks for L2 development in the classroom, where it is impossible to fully control for different variables, unlike in a laboratory setting. There is a further concern about how precisely we can measure learners' L2 development. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to investigate and understand what happens in the classroom to support the theory or a teacher's personal experiences in daily practices. Indeed, it is possible to measure learners' linguistic performance (e.g., discourse, task performance in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency) and their negotiation in L2 learning (e.g., negotiation for meaning/form, language-related episodes) can shed light on the process of L2 learning. Given this, two experiments in the current study were conducted by identifying some of the variables which might affect the realization of a 'meaningful task.' These included the type of task (i.e., collaborative or competitive), the topic of the task (i.e., familiarity), the input (i.e., the language provided), the means of communication (i.e., computer-mediated or face-to-face communication), the nature of the output (i.e., oral or

written), and so forth. Research into methodological dimensions, including studies related to these factors, will be addressed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 presents a study which compared a consensus task in computer-mediated communication (CMC) with the one in face-to-face (FTF) communication. The research was carried out to identify any different impacts on the written development of phrasal verbs, learners' attention to form, and the way learners negotiated language problems. Japanese EFL university students ($n = 28$), who were generally accustomed to teacher-centered instruction, participated in the study. It utilized a dictogloss, in which learners had the opportunity to negotiate any language problems they came across in the process of collaboratively reconstructing a sentence followed by individual dictation. Meanwhile, phrasal verbs, consisting mainly of a small number of common verbs or adverbs in combination with prepositions (e.g. *get, go, come, put / out, off, up*), were tested. The data were collected based on the scores on written pre- and post-tests, which were analyzed using a repeated measure of analysis of variance (ANOVA), and on the transcripts of audio records of learners' oral negotiations. The latter were analyzed for language-related episodes (LREs), which were coded as either meaning- or grammar-based LREs. Chi-square analysis was used to investigate differences between CMC and FTF in learners' attention to each categorized feature of language forms. The results showed no significant differences between the two groups in the development of phrasal verbs or in the amount of attention to the target forms. However, the CMC group spent significantly more time on negotiation for meaning than the

FTF group, and their attention to the types of forms during the task was not identical.

The second study focused more closely on face-to-face communication in order to investigate whether or not teacher-learner and learner-learner discourse affected subsequent task performance and L2 development in EFL classroom settings. Traditionally, teachers often ask questions to which the answers are already known in order to elicit quick responses and check accuracy (White & Lightbown, 1984), whilst the classroom is actually a place where students' creative and imaginative thoughts can be elicited depending on the topic and the context, as seen in a real-world conversation. As little is known about the influence of teacher discourse on students' L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2012), the following research questions were addressed: 1) Does the type of teacher question (referential or display) affect students' responses to the questions? 2) Which type of teacher questions facilitates students' production of accurate question forms in oral and written tests? 3) Do referential and display questions have different effects on students' task performance (complexity, accuracy, fluency) in each of the two tasks (Picture Difference, Personal Information Exchange)? 4) Does the type of task affect students' performance in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency? All discourse in the classrooms was audio-recorded and transcribed, and pre-/post-/delayed written and oral test scores were examined in order to measure learners' accuracy and fluency, and analyzed using ANOVA. Participants ($n = 26$) aged 13-15 at a beginner level were divided into two homogeneous groups; one group was asked display questions to test L2 knowledge, while the other was asked referential questions at the beginning of each lesson.

The experiment was carried out over six months or two semesters, in which Picture Difference Task and Personal Information Task were provided in reverse order to the two groups. The results showed that students tended to economize on words in their responses to the teacher's referential questions in order to avoid communication breakdown or mistakes; regardless of the group, students performed similarly on the tasks with priority given to accuracy; fluency overtook accuracy in the Personal Exchange Task which allowed students to create imaginative conversations.

Based on the findings from the studies, Chapter 6 addresses some issues and answers the general research questions of this study: 1) Will Japanese teenage learners of English accommodate themselves to the meaningfulness of the task provided for L2 development? 2) What suggestions could be made in order to apply tasks in the classroom for Japanese learners at a low level of English proficiency? The former question arises from a concern about the validity of SLA research on TBLT in Japanese educational contexts; the latter question deals with pedagogical issues and implications for the future direction of English language practice in Japan. Issues and future directions are discussed in terms of tasks for successful participation, which involves negotiation, attention to form and tasks for L2 development, communicative abilities, accuracy and fluency, and learners' perceptions. Although there was some evidence that the participants in the studies actually paid attention to form and accuracy on both form-focused and meaning-focused tasks, it remains uncertain whether or not they achieved L2 development in terms of phrasal verbs and question forms. Further investigation

is required to account for the relationship between successful task engagement and L2 development from various perspectives in the light of different age groups, and more longitudinal experiments are called for. In addition, the pedagogical implications in the light of how to provide meaningful tasks, the appropriate choice of tasks, the exploitation of teacher questions, and the use of online tasks will be discussed, followed by Chapter 7, which summarises and concludes the study as a whole.